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Trion Worlds aims to disrupt video-game business with new online titles

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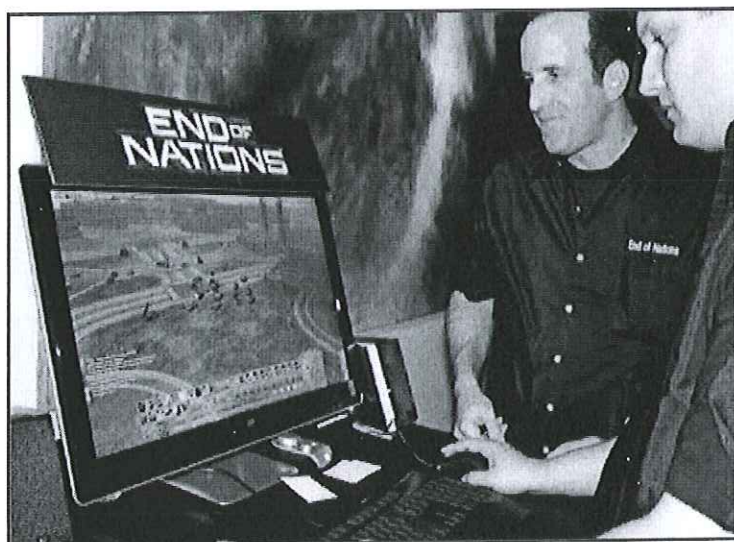


After more than four years of toil, Trion Worlds is raising the curtain today on three major online games that collectively represent one of the most daring bets in video game history.

Many established game companies struggle to make just one massively multiplayer online game at a time. But this startup has raised more than \$100 million and hired a team of 250 people across three studios so that it can produce big games in parallel.

The three PC-based titles are Rift: Planes of Telara; End of Nations, real-time military strategy game set in the near future; and an unnamed title that Trion Worlds is jointly producing with NBC's Syfy Channel. The first two are hitting in 2011, while the third is sometime later than the first two.

"We have raised a significant amount of money to do a most exciting thing," said Lars Buttler, chief executive of Redwood City, Calif.-based Trion Worlds (formerly called Trion World Network). "We are creating high quality online games and, in effect, are taking the video game industry that makes games for hardcore gamers into the connected era."



The ambition is to build a better game than World of Warcraft, the long-running fantasy MMO which has 11 million subscribers and generates more than a billion dollars a year in subscription revenue

for Activision Blizzard. To do that, Trion Worlds had to spend considerable time designing a new online game platform that focused on a server-based architecture.

A new technology platform for server-based games

In its founding back in January 2006, Trion had similar inspirations as OnLive, which is building an online game service where it can do all the processing in servers and send images back to gamers, with almost no computing done on client machines.

But Trion's approach to doing server-based games is very different. Buttler says the company designed its game to take advantage of modern servers which can adjust loads as needed. Rather than do the traditional way where one server handles a whole section of a game world, Trion distributed tasks among a number of servers. It can use one server for artificial intelligence, another server for other features and so on. If one section of the world becomes crowded with players, it can simply tap more servers to handle the load.

It also takes advantage of the user's own computer in a way that OnLive does not. The user downloads software that can render the art work. Hence, the heavy-duty animation is handled by the user's computer, while the company's servers handle the chore of running the game. (If it turns out that technologies such as OnLive or Gaikai prove themselves, Trion can adapt so that its servers work with the rendering technology of the other companies; but for now, Trion will tap user computers for rendering).

With this blend of server and client processing, Trion can create what it calls "dynamic worlds." It can make changes in the parts of the game running in the servers and — presto — the game world can change overnight. Instead of a cheery town, it can turn an environment of the world into ruins. Buttler believes this is the key to creating games worthy of the "next generation" moniker.



"When Blizzard makes a substantial change, they swap out one big world for another," Buttler said. "We can make constant small changes to our world. You may see a merchant one day who is gone the next. A town may be alive or in ruins. The goal is to create a world that is truly alive and that you can influence."

Rift showcases the server-based platform

One game that takes advantage of this is Rift: Planes of Telara (formerly called Heroes of Telara when shown last year). In this game, a beautiful Tolkien-like "high fantasy" world is under attack from dark forces from different dimensions. They open up rifts in space and send in monsters to attack the world. The players have to defend against these attacks to stop their world from tearing apart. Rifts can be triggered by the game designers or the players themselves or even occur spontaneously.

The rifts show that the world is dynamic, or always changing, and not static like past worlds, Buttler said. When a rift opens, the terrain, buildings, lighting, sky and everything else changes. Players can fight the demons coming out of the rift single-handed, or in a group. The more help you have, the more loot you can collect from the dead bodies when the rift episode is over. But with more people, you have to dispatch the various enemies more quickly to be able to get the loot. So the rifts are likely to draw huge numbers of players to one location. With rifts, there are no safe zones in the game. If a rift opens near a town, you will have to defend that town or lose the safety and resources in that town.

The graphics and physical simulation of the environment are cool, with a lot of use of lighting and shadows. Similar to Sony's recent Uncharted 2: Among Thieves game for the PlayStation 3, the draw distances are huge. That is, you can see a long way from one place to another in the game. Typically, online games have short draw distances because it's hard to animate so much detail and then deliver the images to the user's screen over the Internet in a timely manner. The look isn't quite as good as Uncharted 2, but it is very good for an online game. And you can wander for long distances within a level without seeing a loading screen. That keeps users from getting really bored.

End of Nations will stretch how far online games can scale up